

[[Utah](#)] [[Uintah](#)] [[Lookups](#)] [[Query](#)] [[Surname](#)] [[Resources](#)] [[Towns](#)]

The Hard Winter 1879-80

During the hard winter of 1879-80 the people of the valley went through some of the most trying circumstances of their pioneer days. People went hungry and lived on daily rations. There were no vegetables at all and no fruit. There were deer but they were so poor that not a globule of grease would rise in the pot in which they were cooked. There was no way out or in for supplies. The cattle huddled under ledges or anywhere nature had provided a little shelter and there they perished. Several hundred head were lost this way. Whole herds perished until by spring they had dwindled to small numbers and milk was a luxury of high order. So serious it became that some of the most valient and brave men undertook the trip via Brown's Park over the mountain, up to Green River City, Wyoming, for flour and provisions. The team of Al Hatch was one of the first to be offered for service, and the men got together the best horses available under the circumstances of no feed, and started over the rim of the northern mountains that cold day in the winter of 1879. Those who went from the fort were Jim Henry, Pete Peterson, Chell and Lee Hall and Dave Woodruff.

All the money available was put together and sent with these men to purchase flour and supplies and it is said that Archibald Hadlock and Chell Hall added their government pensions to this amount collected to help provide provisions for the needy in the fort that winter. The money was later returned.

The winter of 1879 and 1880 was indeed a hard winter and several things had occurred to make it hard. There were no stacks of alfalfa hay to feed the cattle and help them resist the cold, penetrating frost; and there were no trees or structures for windbreaks over the bench. There were no barns or sheds for shelter, and consequently the cattle became thin and were swept away in large numbers by the cold persistent winter. Ike Burton, W.H. Clark and A.A. Hatch and others recalled counting the dead cattle where they had huddled together in an attempt to keep warm. Besides this situation of natural consequence, the crops of the summer of 1879 had been greatly diminished by the grasshopper menace. They scoured the fields and left waste in their wake. Thus supplies were reduced to a great extent.

Coupled with these conditions and paralleling them in time was the Indian trouble which necessitated the constructing of a fort where the people could move into for protection. This trouble was a result of the Meeker Massacre. The Ute Indian leaders were on friendly terms with the Hatches and Jeremiah Hatch was told by the Indians to build a fort and "fort up" in case protection became necessary. He was informed not to allow opposition to be initiated among the settlers and "if trouble occurs" he was cautioned to hoist a white flag over the fort under which conditions he was promised protection for the settlers.

The fort was constructed where the J.C. Penney store and Uintah State bank stand. Log cabins were to be placed about in a square, facing in, with a space between so that log buttresses could be put up for fighting purposes if necessary. However, it was not finished so it formed a "U" shape.

Map of Fort

Thus in the winter of 1879 to 1880 this community of fort houses, sometimes jovially spoken of as "Jericho" and sometimes as "Hatchtown" because of the great influence of Jeremiah Hatch (who had two wives), contained the families of Jeremiah Hatch Sr., Al Hatch, Al Johnston, Jim Henry, I.J. Clark (who had three wives), Bradford Bird, Bill Reynolds, John Harper and mother, Dave Woodruff who married Hatch's daughter, Pete Peterson, J. Dorathy, Charles Bartlett, Moroni Taylor, Lomoni Taylor, Ephraim Perks, William Gagon, Thomas Karren, Archibald Hadlock, James Hacking and one or two others. There may have been others coming in and out during the winter.

In an attempt to supply the settlers with water, a well was dug in the center of the enclosure. They dug down sixty feet but failed to strike the desirable objective and the project was abandoned. The closest available water was a streamlet which had been turned down a gulch, which ran in a southeasterly direction about five-eighths of a mile below the fort that winter. From there a beaten path was kept open in the process of securing water for the inhabitants of the fort that winter.

Not all families moved within the fort and among those remaining on their ranches were Nelson Merkley Sr., Joseph H. Black, T. Taylor, Alma Taylor, David Johnston, William Perry, J. Henderson and Beldon Reynolds. This of course does not account for all the settlers of the valley as there were many in Old Ashley Town, Dry Fork, Jensen and various others scattered along the river and up toward Brush Creek. There were in reality three localities that winter: The fort, Old Ashley Town, and the more scattered settlement on Green River. We are unable to give a complete list of families who were in the county that winter, but so far as we know at present they were as follows: See List

the Spring of 1880 when the people of the fort were on their last rations, they saw winding back and forth across the foothills their north and east, the returning wagons bringing flour from Green River City, Wyoming. Kate Merkley Peterson, the daughter of Pete Peterson who was a member of the returning caravan, went with two other girls to meet the men returning home. The first words uttered by her father were "Katie, who has died?" to which Kate answered "No one." Upon hearing this her father said, "Kate could not understand why her father would shed tears when no one had died, but later in life added "I could understand the meaning of his tears." and when the men drove into the fort and unloaded the sacks of flour in the square, "I tell you that pile of sacks standing before us was the most beautiful sight we ever saw."

On their return from Wyoming where they had ferried across the Green River, the men had camped for the evening when L. D. Fry, noted the torrential appearing of the "spring rising" of the river. Against the wishes of some of the party, he persisted in waiting again and crossing the river that night. Happy they were for having done so, for by morning the spring floods had raised the level of water several feet high and to cross would have been extremely dangerous and difficult if at all possible. The advent of spring was very late that season and the farmers were unable to begin operations until the first week in April. Steps looking to the organization of a new county were taken and early in the spring of 1880 Uintah County was organized. Mr. Dillman who recalled the winter vividly, made the following remarks. At this time his headquarters were in Ashley, not Hatchtown. Few settlers had arrived in the fall, and had brought few provisions with them for they expected to purchase flour, sugar and the like in Ashley, but instead there were just that many more mouths to feed.

Excerpts from the "Builders of Uintah", courtesy of the Daughters of the Utah Pioneers

actually 3 separate Towns =
1. The Old Fort
2. Old Ashley Town
3. A settlement on the Green River

[[Utah](#)] [[Uintah](#)] [[Lookups](#)] [[Query](#)] [[Surname](#)] [[Resources](#)] [[Towns](#)]

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Dry Fork

Originally known as Mountain Dell, the town of Dry Fork first settled in 1878. It got it's name from the fact that it was the "Dry Fork" of the Ashley Creek for most of the year. Teancum Taylor was an early settler in the Ashley Valley and a polygamist who housed one of his wives at Dry Fork. In 1877 he persuaded several families from Ashley Town to settle in the Dry Fork area by dividing up land he had settled and giving lots to anyone who would build on it.

Alma Taylor and Chellus Hall brought the first loads of logs out of the mountains in order to build a schoolhouse. The first school teacher here was Mark Hall. Other early residents were the families of Thomas Bingham Sr., Thomas Bingham Jr., Fred Williams, a Mr. Burns, George Keary, John Nielson, Charles Nye, Orson Nye, William Perry, Lee Hall, Iowa Hall, and Fletcher Hammond.